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'Star Wars' Sparks New Campus Debate

Universities Savor Federal Funds but Question Classified Research

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By Keith B. Richburg
Washington Post Staff Writer

BOSTON—President Reagan's proposed "Star Wars" space-based missile defense system has sparked a new version of one of the most intense campus debates of the 1960s: the role of weapons development and classified research at universities.

This time, the debate has an added dimension because, with many universities feeling a financial squeeze, Star Wars research represents the largest source of federal funds likely to be available for several years.

The result is a painful dilemma on many campuses, where, although many academics are skeptical about becoming closely associated with a system they think is scientifically ill-conceived and dangerous to existing arms-control agreements, some are scrambling for favorable positions in the expected competition for research contracts.

"It's a problem because money is very tight these days," said Cornell University physics professor David Mermin. "It's a serious problem, and people are going to have to cut back."

Issues raised by the debate—including academic freedom, the need for secrecy in national security research and the proper political role of scientists—

lack clear-cut divisions, but in many cases university scientists are pitted against each other or against administrators interested in securing new grants and contracts.

"There is a split," Mermin said. "The administrators came along and said, 'Here's a lot of money,' and the faculty members said, 'Hold on just a minute.'"

The debate also underscores the complex relationship between the federal government and universities, a multibillion-dollar marriage of convenience that during the Reagan administration has been strained over several issues, including:

■ The Office of Management and Budget's closer scrutiny of university contracts. The OMB recently denied some schools' claims of costly overhead expenses and forced several schools to give back thousands of dollars.

■ The Defense Department's move to restrict publication or presentation of certain sensitive information. In a widely publicized case in April, the Pentagon invoked a provision of the Export Control Act in ordering the sponsor of a technical symposium to restrict the audience to U.S. citizens and to cancel presentation of a dozen classified research papers.

University officials cite this as a case of Pentagon censorship, although a Defense Department official said that it was basically a misunderstanding and that the authors of the classified papers had never received clearance.

■ The practice by several federal departments of writing into their contracts clauses giving the agency the right to review research findings before they are published, raising the possibility of censorship.

■ The State Department's denying entry visas to certain politically controversial scholars and lecturers, including a Canadian environmentalist, a Mexican leftist writer and the wife of slain Chilean socialist president Salvador Allende.

■ A gradual "militarization" of research money flowing onto college campuses, meaning that the Pentagon accounts for an increasingly large share of federal grants and contracts and that more Pentagon money is directed toward weaponry at the expense of other "basic" or nonmilitary research.

All of these scattered concerns have crystallized recently around Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), popularly dubbed Star Wars.

Generally speaking, the worry on the campuses is that involvement with the SDI is likely to force universities into financial dependency on a politically divisive weapons project that can ultimately become too sensitive to remain a topic of open discussion.

"What is this going to do to freedom of scientific communication?" asked Robert Rosenzweig, president of the American Association of Universities. "We've been assured that this is all going to be basic research, not classified and not restricted. But I think a lot of people are skeptical about this still."

"We don't think anybody is lying to us," he said, "but what lies down the road is success. What if it suddenly becomes apparent that the line of research has some practical application?"

John Shattuck, Harvard's vice president for government, community and public affairs, put it this way: "If it looked like what I was studying was going to become a key part of the 'Star Wars' defense system, the Defense Department could turn around and classify it.

"The big question," Shattuck said, "is will there be classified research conducted on campus?"

Defense Department officials associated with the Star Wars project say fears on the campuses are exaggerated. "I think it's been blown all out of proportion," said Leo Young, the Pentagon's director for research and laboratory management.

Much of the misunderstanding, Young said, stems from the fact that Star Wars money is coming from a Pentagon research category reserved for "advanced develop-

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